Kulintang: A musical tradition of the Philippines

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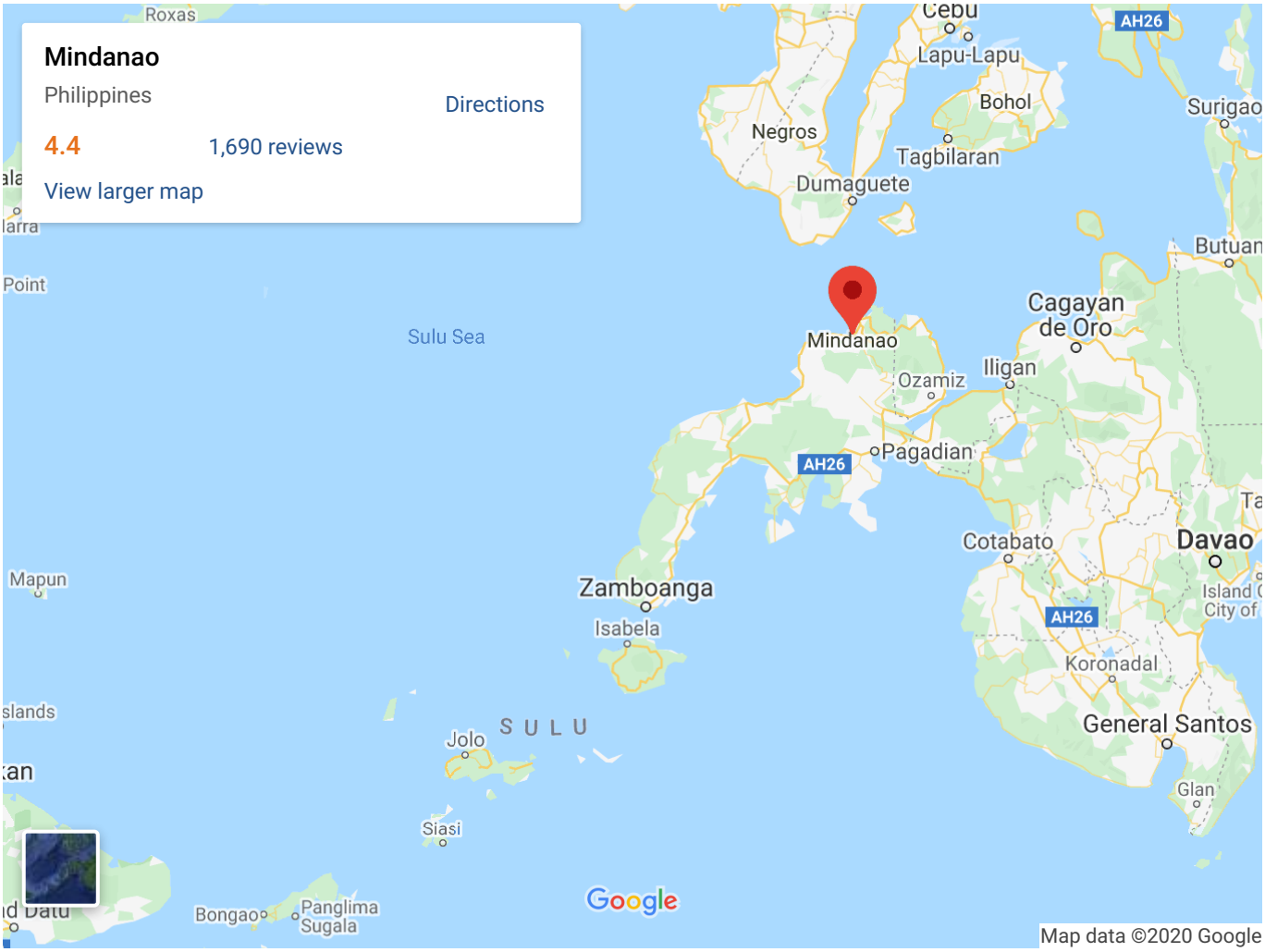
For Eleanor Lipat-Chesler, playing the kulintang is not just about the music.

It's about understanding and sharing Mindanao culture, breaking down barriers and fostering human connections.

"The prejudices about people who live in Mindanao are so strong and deep," said Lipat-Chesler, a Los Angeles-based ethnomusicologist and performing artist. "The anti-Muslim sentiment is so dangerous and frightening, and now more than ever it's important to find common ground and help break down this mistrust, this suspicion of 'the other.'"

Mindanao is the second largest island of the Philippines, located in the southern part of the predominantly Catholic, archipelago nation. About 24 million people, representing

nearly a quarter of the Philippine population, live in the Mindanao island group, which includes several smaller landmasses surrounding the main island.



Situated within the mainland is the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which is home to more than half of the Philippines' Muslim population. Last year, the region became infamous for being the site of the Marawi siege, the five-month armed conflict between Philippine government forces and ISIL-affiliated militants that claimed more than 1,100 lives.

With news and images of such conflicts making worldwide headlines, Lipat-Chesler believes it's her duty as a Filipino-American researcher and performer to share another side of Mindanao; the side that is full of beauty, diversity and honored ancient traditions.

"That is really the goal of playing (kulintang) music in the United States for me," she said.

Eleanor Lipat-Chesler performs with fellow members of the Pakaraguian Kulintang Ensemble. (Photo courtesy of Eleanor Lipat-Chesler)

Kulintang of the Southern Philippines is part of a larger, ancient gong and chime tradition found throughout Southeast Asia. The term refers to both the instrument, which comprises eight knobbed gongs laid horizontally on a wooden frame; as well as the larger ensemble, which includes several other suspended gongs and drums.

Lipat-Chesler performs with the Pakaraguian Kulintang Ensemble, which together with Malaya Filipino American Dance Arts, comprises the performance arm of Ube Arte, a performing arts research and education collective that works primarily in Southern California. Lipat-Chesler is one of the founding members of the collective, alongside Bernard Ellorin, Peter de Guzman and Mary Talusan Lacanlale.

Although many today associate kulintang music with Mindanao's Muslim community, the tribal tradition predates the late-13th century arrival of Islam in the Philippines.

"It really is not about the Islamic practices," Lipat-Chesler said. "It's about the social and cultural practices."

And the music is still performed in the region, not only as accompaniment to ritual dance or during healing ceremonies, but also as entertainment during celebrations and social functions.

Lipat-Chesler sees performing kulintang music as an opportunity to educate others about Mindanao's diversity. About 30 different native ethnolinguistic groups live in the Mindanao islands alone.

"My colleagues and I, we'd really like to see more understanding about the variety and differences among all these groups . . . not lumping them together as 'Muslim Mindanao,' because they don't lump themselves with each other," she said. "If our kulintang playing can in any way help people open up their minds to understanding the diversity of Mindanao's musical practices, that's one huge change we hope to affect in the understanding of Philippine culture as a whole."

Philippines Kulintang Mindanao World Music

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